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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development: review of relevant United Nations plans and programmes of action pertaining to the situation of social groups

Implementation of the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons

Interim report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The current note has been prepared pursuant to paragraph 10 of General Assembly resolution 52/82, of 12 December 1997, "Implementation of the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons; towards a society for all in the twenty-first century", in which the Assembly requests the Secretary-General to submit a report on implementation of the resolution to the Assembly at its fifty-fourth session, through the Commission for Social Development at its thirty-seventh session. The note also responds to Economic and Social Council resolution 1997/19, of 21 July 1997, "Equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities", in which, in paragraph 21, the Council requests the Secretary-General to include in his report to the Commission at its thirty-seventh session activities of the United Nations system related to its priority theme of social services for all.

2. The note emphasizes progress in the implementation of paragraph 4 of Assembly resolution 52/82, in which three "key social and economic policy issues related to the equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities" are identified — accessibility, social services and social safety nets, and employment and sustainable livelihoods. The note briefly reviews activities relating to the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons (1993–2002) and progress in the implementation of its goal of "full participation and equality of persons with disabilities".

II. Progress in equalization of opportunities of persons with disabilities

3. In resolution 52/82 the General Assembly reaffirmed the role of the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons[1] as a framework for the design and evaluation of disability policies and programmes. The World Programme has two goals: full participation; and equality of persons with disabilities. The experience of countries in implementing the World Programme has contributed to both increased awareness of the disability perspective in policy

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design, planning and evaluation and placement of disability issues in a broad human rights context. Instead of being perceived as the concern of one social group with particular needs, the rights of persons with disabilities are increasingly being recognized as a prerequisite to the advancement of the social, economic, cultural, civil and political rights of all.

4. Progress to date in implementing the priority issues identified in its paragraph 4 of resolution 52/82 is discussed in paragraphs 4–18 below.

A. Accessibility

5. The Division for Social Policy and Development (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Secretariat) is making a major effort to ensure that its social development information resources are accessible to all. In the first half of 1998, with expert assistance, the Division planned and developed, within the United Nations Headquarters Internet presence, the Internet-based "Gateway to social policy and development" (http://www.un.org/esa/socdev). The Gateway design applies international criteria for accessible Internet-based information services. Within the Gateway site, the "Persons with disabilities" site (http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/disabled.htm) fully meets the Internet accessibility standards developed at the Center for Applied Special Technology, a non-governmental organization that analyses web pages for their accessibility to persons with disabilities (http://www.cast.org/bobby).

6. Two aspects of Internet accessibility were of concern in the design and development of the "Persons with disabilities" site :

(a) Key information resources were identified for the various constituencies for global social policy and development issues; access to those information resources was designed and delivered in ways that are user-friendly to persons with physical or sensorial disabilities so that they can easily, intuitively and efficiently navigate, use and retrieve timely and relevant social development information resources;

(b) Social development information resources must also be accessible to all interested communities, particularly those that are using information technologies and telecommunications structures at various levels of development. Consequently, information resources at the "Gateway to social policy and development" site are designed so that anyone interested in social policy and development issues can access the site in less than one minute, even with a relatively slow computer modem over a conventional telephone line. This particular Internet design feature has lowered the cost of accessing social development information services for all.

7. In terms of accessible information resources, the Gateway includes references to a number of key social development instruments in formats that are fully accessible, in accordance with relevant standards. For instance, the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and the Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development are located at http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/wssd.htm; international plans and programmes of action in the fields of ageing, persons with disabilities and youth are also available at the Gateway site.

8. The Persons with disabilities site includes links, regularly updated, to a number of international norms and standards related to persons with disabilities and to substantive and parliamentary documents on global disability policies and programmes. On-line documentary resources include the second monitoring report of the Special Rapporteur on Disability and the third review and appraisal of the World Programme of Action (http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/disabled.htm).

9. The use of accessible information resources has allowed the Division to present in a timely and cost-effective manner a range of substantive materials to its specialized constituencies. For instance, Disabled Peoples International, a non-governmental organization, convened, in cooperation with the Government of the Dominican Republic, the Dominican National Federation of Disabled Persons (FENADID) and the Dominican Association for Rehabilitation (ADR), a subregional workshop for Central America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean on the "training of trainers in monitoring the implementation of the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunity for Persons with Disabilities" (Santo Domingo, 13–18 April 1998). The report of the workshop, which includes an action plan formulated by participants to further implement international norms and standards related to persons with disabilities, is located at http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/disttsre.htm.

10. In response to a request from the Ministry of Justice of the Government of Uganda for substantive background to assist in its drafting of national legislation related to persons with disabilities, the Division prepared — and has continued to compile and publish at its "Persons with disabilities" site — an overview of international legal frameworks for disability legislation (http://www.un.org/esa/

socdev/disovlf.htm) which provides an introduction to the role of international norms and standards in the drafting of legislation and includes electronic links to key international instruments related to the rights of persons with disabilities.

11. As a means to promote awareness and build capacities for accessible Internet-based resources, the Division organized, on request, briefings for interested governmental representatives on Internet policies, structures and technologies, and is currently conducting, with the assistance of consultant specialists, a seminar and on-line workshop on Internet accessibility (December 1998 to April 1999). Seminar and workshop materials have been published on the Internet (http://www.intlmgt.com/internetseminar.html). The Division placed the seminar and workshop resources on-line so that the technical exchanges will be open to the larger United Nations system and other interested communities. For instance, specialist staff of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, at Bangkok, are currently following the seminar and workshop by means of the information technologies available to the Organization; a number of interested governmental officials, academics and representatives of non-governmental organizations reportedly are following the seminar and workshop on-line as well.

12. The work of the Division related to Internet accessibility was recently recognized by two non-governmental organizations. On 2 December 1998 in a ceremony at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, in New York, the Non-Profiting Computing Organization presented the Division with the Howard Silverman Award for its efforts in making social development information accessible to all; on 4 December 1998 in a ceremony at the State Department in Washington, D.C., the People-to-People Committee on Disability presented the Division with the Bernard Posner Award for its efforts to promote international Internet accessibility.

13. A related accessibility issue identified in the third review and appraisal of the World Programme of Action (A/52/351) is environmental accessibility, in particular accessible shelter and urban infrastructure. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has been cooperating with the Ministry of Social Affairs of the Government of Lebanon and the Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut Central District (SOLIDERE) in the analysis and planning of the Beirut Central Area as a barrier-free environment that could serve as a model for the rest of the country. This is discussed in the technical monograph, "Accessibility for the disabled in the urban environment of the ESCWA region: planning and design solutions" (E/ESCWA/HS/1997/5) and in "Accessibility for the disabled; a design manual for a barrier-free environment".[2] ESCWA provides, on request, advice and assistance and organizes training activities on accessibility and on planning and design of barrier-free environments. The Division for Social Policy and Development is currently cooperating with ESCWA in the design and conduct of a comparative study on the application of accessibility norms and standards and universal design concepts and methods by selected developing countries.

B. Social security and social safety nets

14. In cooperation with the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and with substantive assistance from the National Institute of Development Administration of Thailand, the Division for Social Policy and Development organized the expert Workshop on Ensuring Access to Social Services of Under-served Populations (Bangkok, 2–6 November 1998). The report of the Workshop is before the current session of the Commission, in connection with its consideration of the priority theme, "Social services for All" (E/CN.5/1999/6).

15. From the disability perspective, the report considers social service design, planning and delivery and evaluation in a disability-sensitive context rather than as an issue of concern to a particular social group. For instance, the concept of under-served populations is addressed in terms — both qualitative and quantitative — that pertain to all. Recommended improvements in social service design, planning and delivery include strengthening mechanisms for participation by civil society in the determination and evaluation of services and strengthening the role that rights-based approaches play in ensuring social services for all, in particular the rights to inclusion, to participation and to accountability.

C. Employment and sustainable livelihoods

16. One of the three priority themes considered at the World Summit for Social Development is employment and sustainable livelihoods. From the disability perspective, it deals with disability-sensitive policy options that promote sustainable livelihoods and employment opportunities for all and with investment options in the social sectors that contribute to increased accessibility for all in social, economic and political environments.

17. In connection with the 1998 observance of the International Day of Disabled Persons, an expert panel

discussion was organized at United Nations Headquarters on the topic "Lifecycle approaches to sustainable and secure livelihoods and well-being for people with disabilities". The panel was moderated by the Chairman of the Second Committee (Economic and Financial Matters) of the fifty-third session of the General Assembly, Mr. Bagher Asadi (Islamic Republic of Iran), and included experts in their individual capacity from the academic, non-governmental and private sectors. The Panel's attention to independent living and sustainable and secure livelihoods reflects the growing interest in the political economy of disability and concern with practical measures that promote and support development of the social, economic and creative potential of all members of society.

18. The role of microcredit in the eradication of poverty was considered by the General Assembly at its fifty-third session (A/53/223). However, the role of microcredit, leadership training and institutional development in promoting sustainable and secure livelihoods for specific social groups is a more recent area of policy and programme interest to the Division. A recent contribution to the topic was the Seminar on Microcredit and Persons with Disabilities in Western Africa (Bamako, 25–30 October 1998), organized by the Government of Mali, the Western Africa Federation of Persons with Disabilities (FOAPH) and the Agency for International Cooperation for Social and Economic Integration of Persons with Disabilities (ACIPH), a non-governmental organization. The seminar brought together specialists and representatives of organizations of persons with disabilities from 10 Western African countries to review and discuss issues and trends and to formulate recommendations for more effective incorporation of disability concerns in policies and programmes on microcredit and microfinance. The seminar was co-financed by a grant from the United Nations Voluntary Fund on Disability. The report of the seminar is being published.

III. Progress in implementation of international norms and standards relating to persons with disabilities

19. A great deal of innovative action aimed at building awareness and promoting implementation of international norms and standards relating to persons with disabilities is occurring in training workshops, technical exchanges and academic meetings, which in turn affect policy processes. As noted above, the Government of the Dominican Republic, in cooperation with the non-governmental community, organized a training workshop on the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities. The workshop was the first such technical exchange among specialists from Central America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. In addition to a review and analysis of the 22 rules, in light of conditions prevailing in the countries of the subregion, workshop participants formulated an action plan on equalization of opportunities and prepared an analytical review of proposed revisions to the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps (ICIDH).[3] The workshop was co-financed by a grant from the United Nations Voluntary Fund on Disability. The workshop report and ICIDH critique are available on the Internet at http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/disttsre.htm.

20. Recently, Boalt Hall School of Law of the University of California at Berkeley (United States) organized, in cooperation with the World Institute on Disability, a non-governmental organization, a consultative expert meeting on international norms and standards relating to disability (Berkeley, 8–12 December 1998). The meeting brought together 13 experts in law and policy analysis, representing all regions and legal systems, who participated in their individual capacity, to review and discuss issues and trends related to the application of international norms and standards in the design and drafting of national legislation and to formulate recommendations on drafting disability-sensitive national legislation and model legislative texts. Findings of the meeting were considered at a public forum (Berkeley, 11 December 1998), organized in cooperation with the World Institute on Disability, which included participants from civil society, academia and the non-governmental community. The meeting was co-financed by a grant from the United Nations Voluntary Fund on Disability. The analytical report of the meeting is being published.

IV. Other priority topics

A. Children with disabilities

21. The question of children with disabilities was considered by the Commission for Social Development at its thirty-fifth session. Recommendations for action were endorsed by the Economic and Social Council in resolution 1997/20. As follow-up to the resolution, the Division for Social Policy and Development, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Secretariat, participates in activities of the open-ended International Working Group on Disability and Development. The Working Group provides a forum for international organizations,

international non-governmental organizations, bilateral development cooperation agencies and national technical departments and ministries to exchange views and to plan joint actions. Among its current activities, the Group is formulating a strategy for information dissemination by interested members among the constituencies concerned with the social and economic situation of children and young adults with disabilities. At the last meeting of the Working Group, held at Washington, D.C., in September 1998, the consultant to the World Bank on disability policies, Dr. Robert L. Metts, presented a review of social and economic aspects of disability and outlined ways in which the World Bank could assist countries, on request, to increase participation in development by persons with disabilities.

22. In August 1998 the Ministry of Health of the Government of Armenia organized an Interministerial International Conference on Childhood Disability (Yerevan, 17–18 August 1998) which brought together international specialists in the field, representatives of concerned international organizations, the Special Rapporteur on Disability of the Commission for Social Development, Mr. Bengt Lindqvist, and national specialists. The Conference provided a policy-level forum for a comprehensive and integrated review and discussion of the situation of children with disabilities.

B. Assistive technologies: the case of wheeled mobility

23. Since the design, testing and evaluation and dissemination of assistive technologies are major factors in promoting environmental accessibility for all, during the period under review, the Division for Social Policy and Development cooperated with Whirlwind Wheelchair International (School of Engineering, San Francisco State University (United States) in the organization and conduct of comparative studies and technical exchanges on national capacity-building for wheeled mobility. The data available according to the Whirlwind Wheelchair International suggest a need for 20,000,000 wheeled mobility devices by the year 2020 to meet the projected needs of persons with disabilities in developing countries, and the estimated resources for this task are US$ 4 billion. The cooperative study and informal exchanges identified three factors that influence action to promote accessibility and mobility for all:

(a) An institutional setting for mobility and accessibility, which provides policy priorities and options for plans, programmes and budgets;

(b) A resource framework for mobility and accessibility, which includes both financial resources for investments to develop both human potential and social infrastructure and technical and managerial resources needed to translate policy intent into practical, sustained and effective action;

(c) A coordination framework, which facilitates coherence between policy intent and action by the various institutions of society and provides mechanisms for dialogue among the parties concerned.

As part of the follow-up to the cooperative study, Whirlwind Women of the Whirlwind Wheelchair International organized a training workshop on wheeled mobility and women with disabilities, in cooperation with the Ministry of Gender and Community Development of the Government of Uganda. The workshop was co-financed by a grant from the United Nations Voluntary Fund on Disability. Other initiatives in wheeled mobility, assisted by the Fund, are currently under way in Ecuador and Guyana.

V. Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons (1993–2002)

24. By resolution 48/3 of 23 April 1993, member States of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) proclaimed the period 1993–2002 the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons, with the goals of full participation and equality. During the period under review, the secretariat of ESCAP undertook, in cooperation with interested member States and the non-governmental community, a number of practical activities, described in the paragraphs below.

A. Promoting barrier-free societies

25. Improving the lives of diverse disability groups continues to be high on ESCAP's agenda. The Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons aims to promote the active participation of disabled people in the mainstream development process. Regional networking and cooperation are in full swing. The main mechanism is the Subcommittee on Disability-related Concerns of the Regional Interagency Committee for Asia and the Pacific. ESCAP serves as the secretariat of the Subcommittee, whose membership includes United Nations agencies and governmental and non-governmental organizations concerned with regional cooperation on Decade-related matters.

26. During the biennium 1996–1997, ESCAP issued eight volumes of technical material in support of the implementation of the Decade's Agenda for Action. The volumes are being reviewed for accuracy and accessibility prior to publication on the Internet site for the Decade (http://www.unescap.org/decade). Monograph subjects include assistive devices, legislation, community-based rehabilitation, and self-help organizations of disabled persons.

27. Building on its earlier work in the promotion of non-handicapping environments, ESCAP has prepared a draft guide on training disabled persons as trainers for accessible environments. The draft guide will be field-tested in three cities (Bangalore, India; Penang, Malaysia; and Pattaya, Thailand). To further networking on accessibility initiatives, preparations are in progress for a training-of-trainers seminar, envisaged for 1999.

28. Education and technology for disabled children and youth is a new area of activity for ESCAP. Topics are being developed in collaboration with Subcommittee partners, and a regional consultation-cum-exhibition is envisaged for late 1999.

29. To date, 36 regional governments have signed the Proclamation on the Full Participation and Equality of People with Disabilities in the Asian and Pacific Region.

B. Selected experiences in promoting non-handicapping environments in Asia and the Pacific

30. Participation in mainstream development programmes is a basic entitlement of all. However, such programmes are often located in venues that are inaccessible to persons with disabilities. In most of the ESCAP region, physical barriers in the built environment prevent disabled persons from using buildings, the spaces connecting built areas, public transport systems, and other public facilities and services. This has the profound negative effect of excluding disabled persons from society. Exclusion from education and training programmes for gainful employment and self-employment means that disability groups are often over-represented among the illiterate and the poor. Since large numbers of disabled persons do not enjoy freedom of movement, they cannot be seen in public places, and there is an observed tendency to dismiss them as an insignificant minority.

31. Through a series of projects, ESCAP has initiated action, on the request of interested Governments, to highlight the need for barrier-free societies. ESCAP studies have established a clear link between the access needs of disabled persons and those of rapidly ageing societies and of other users whose needs have hitherto been neglected. Such users include children, women, people carrying heavy loads and those who may not identify themselves as disabled persons but who may, nevertheless, be infirm and have the same needs as disabled persons for safety and convenience features in the built environment.

32. In Bangkok, Beijing and New Delhi, ESCAP action has facilitated the creation of model approaches to promoting awareness and understanding of non-handicapping environments for persons with disabilities and older persons. In the pilot project sites in these three major metropolitan areas, there have been tangible improvements, such as kerb ramps for wheelchair users and tactile Braille pathways for the blind and persons with visual impairments. Accessible facilities for banking, post and telecommunications, schooling, shopping, leisure and cultural activities are among other concrete benefits. Improvements have been introduced outside the pilot project areas. Videos were made of each pilot project.

33. In addition to the project sites, of value for technical cooperation among developing countries, ESCAP has promoted the indigenous production of technical guidelines based on its regional guidelines on non-handicapping environments. Access-related legislative development is well under way. Models also exist for capacity-building (on access issues) among professionals and policy makers concerned with diverse aspects of infrastructure development appropriate to developing countries.

34. ESCAP plans to use the pilot project videos in its production of a comprehensive video on barrier-free environments. Persons committed to access promotion in many cities in the ESCAP region have agreed to participate in networking on access initiatives. This networking will focus on exchanges of information and experiences, including exchanges in training professionals. ESCAP is field-testing a draft guide on training disabled persons as trainers for the promotion of non-handicapping environments.

VI. Concluding remarks

35. Many of the activities described above are of a pilot nature, and their further development will be considered in the report that the Secretary-General will submit to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session. Progress in activities that have only recently been implemented will also

be conveyed to the Assembly, as will the complex technical issues of statistics on persons with disabilities and accessibility at the United Nations.

Notes

[1] See General Assembly resolution 37/52.

[2] Beirut, SOLIDARE, in cooperation with the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia.

[3] Issued by the World Health Organization in 1980, and currently being revised.